

# Benjamin Franklin

THOUGH most men devote their years to one principal vocation, Benjamin Franklin made notable achievements in several careers. Men have described him as amazing, ingenious, universal — a many-sided man whose inquiring mind turned with zest to the contemplation of his age and its people.

His life nearly spanned his century. It epitomized the ideals of the Enlightenment — humanist in approach, versatile in range, passionate for self-improvement, and practical in the uses of knowledge. During his eighty-four years, from 1706 to 1790, he was printer, publisher, inventor, scientist, educator, colonial agent, politician, statesman, militia colonel, postmaster-general, diplomat, and peacemaker. In all these pursuits, in a century marked by far-reaching intellectual and political changes, Franklin achieved eminence as “a great and wise man moving through great and troubling times.”

Philadelphia claims Franklin as its most illustrious son, even though he moved there from Boston, his birthplace, at the age of seventeen. His education and training consisted of two years of formal schooling, two years as an apprentice to his father in the tallow and soap business, and five years learning the printing trade with his older brother James.

Disagreements with James persuaded Franklin to leave Boston and find employment as a journeyman printer in another port city. With slim re-

sources, he arrived in Philadelphia in October, 1723, and was soon at work in the print shop of Samuel Keimer. Impressed by the youthful printer's writing talent, Pennsylvania's Governor Sir William Keith promised to make him official printer of the colony if he would establish his own business. Franklin journeyed to England to purchase presses

and type for his shop. But support from the erratic governor was not forthcoming, and the disappointed young man, stranded in London, worked for several printers in that city before returning to America.

Back in Philadelphia he again worked for Keimer. Then in 1730 he began his own print shop. Shortly he took on the publication of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a paper founded two years earlier by his former employer. Following this he was made official printer to the colony. His reputation as a rustic philosopher grew out of the homely humor and instructive maxims that appeared in his *Poor Rich-*

*ard's Almanack*, published annually for twenty-five years. To his readers Franklin offered such proverbial homilies as the following:

*Poverty wants some things, luxury many things, avarice all things.*

*Wealth is not his that has it, but his that enjoys it.*

*Fish and visitors smell in three days.*

*Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.*



Courtesy of Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

*Benjamin Franklin by Charles Willson Peale.*

*He's a fool that makes his doctor his heir.*

Franklin enjoyed and stimulated good conversation among congenial associates in the "Junto," a debating club he had organized while working for Keimer. He became an "up and coming" young man in public affairs, busily engaged in promoting civic improvements. Largely at his instigation Philadelphia's streets were paved, cleaned, and better illuminated. Fire companies were organized, a fire insurance company begun, the police system improved, and the first circulating library in the country established. His keen desire to further scientific knowledge led to the founding of the American Philosophical Society, today one of the world's most respected learned societies. Franklin's talents as a promoter were used by his friend Dr. Thomas Bond in raising funds to build Philadelphia's first hospital, the Pennsylvania Hospital. Through the *Gazette* and, as he confesses, by "political manoeuvres" and "some use of cunning," the Pennsylvania Assembly and the public were persuaded to contribute more than the £4,000 (pounds) needed to finance the project.

Franklin believed the schools of his time had outlived their usefulness. Training centered mainly upon the classical languages, rhetoric, theology, philosophy, and physics. To his mind this was too narrow a curriculum. His views advocating a more practical education were printed in *Proposals Relative to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*. His suggestions took root, and from them blossomed the Academy for the Education of Youth, parent of first the College of Philadelphia and then the University of Pennsylvania.

The probing mind of Franklin was challenged by the phenomena of nature for which there were no rational explanations. The many public trusts he filled up to the time of the Revolution make one wonder where he found the leisure to give to scientific speculation and experimenting. From 1736 to 1751 he was clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly, and then a member of that body from 1751 to 1764. In the same period he was made deputy postmaster at Philadelphia, and then designated a deputy postmaster-general for all the colonies from 1753 to 1774. He attended conferences with the Indians, printed the treaties made with

them, and when some took to the warpath as allies of the French in the 1750's, he was one of the commissioners charged with raising troops and building fortifications along the frontier line of the Blue Mountains. The first specific plan for uniting the colonies for mutual protection and improved government was proposed by Franklin at an intercolonial conference in Albany, New York, in 1754.

The busiest people always find time to do more. So it was with Franklin. Amid all his official chores, the cares of a growing family, and the good works he sponsored, his inquiring mind constantly sought answers to the unknowns of the natural world. In his *Gazette* questions were raised and observations made about thunderstorms, earthquakes, climatic changes, rock formations, and natural springs. His inventiveness in 1744 produced the "Pennsylvania Fireplace," or Franklin stove, a comfortable improvement over the open fireplace. When failing eyesight handicapped him forty years later, he ingeniously devised bifocal lenses for his spectacles. And the first expedition of Americans sent to explore the Arctic in search of the Northwest Passage in 1753 was undertaken largely at Franklin's urging and with his aid.

The most prized possession of Philadelphia's Franklin Institute is the "electric tube" with which Franklin conducted his experiments in the mystifying phenomenon of electricity. He deduced principles basic to the understanding of such aspects of electricity as positive and negative current, conduction, and condensers. He rigged up an electric battery, and he demonstrated that lightning was a form of electricity with his well-known kite and key experiment. This last reinforced the theories which had led him to the invention of the lightning rod. These were momentous findings and received a great deal of attention in America and Europe. He had become Doctor Franklin, savant.

Anticipating advances in medicine, Franklin urged the acceptance of smallpox inoculation; he diagnosed the causes of lead poisoning common among printers; he advised cleanliness, exercise, proper diet, and fresh air as the best treatment for colds; and he invented one or more medical instruments. One of the earlier books printed on his



press was entitled *Every Man His Own Doctor*, a best seller.

The closing third of Franklin's life allowed even less opportunity to theorize and experiment with his real love, science. From the 1760's to 1790 he was in the service of Pennsylvania and the new-born United States. Great Britain's House



Courtesy American Philosophical Society

*Portrait of Deborah (Mrs. Benjamin) Franklin, a copy attributed to Benjamin Wilson (ca. 1759).*

of Commons listened carefully to his calm and masterly opposition to the Stamp Tax imposed upon the colonists. As this and other causes of friction mounted between Mother Country and America, he worked diligently to conciliate the two sides and to prevent disruption of the empire. Franklin's perennial verve cropped up in a prickling satire published in London entitled *Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One*. He remained in England using his talent for diplomacy and his influence to preserve the union, but by the spring of 1775 he knew it was of no avail. He was midway across the Atlantic when the shooting began at Lexington and Concord.

Franklin became the elder statesman of the Revolution. Though now approaching seventy, he submitted to the demands made upon him with these words, "I am but a fag end, and you may have me for what you please." In the turbulent preparation and first stages of the struggle, he became a member of the Continental Congress, was first postmaster-general, sketched a plan of union for the colonies, tried to persuade the Canadians to join the Americans, gave advice on defenses, and considered proposals of peace. He was one of five men chosen to write the Declaration of Independence, though the composition was largely that of Thomas Jefferson. Franklin gave wise counsel to agents sent abroad to obtain arms and assistance. Late in 1776 Congress sent him back across the Atlantic with Arthur Lee, this time to win France as an ally.

Franklin, the universal man, simple in dress, modest in manner, benign, witty, and charming in conversation, captured the affection of the French from the sophisticate of the salon to the peasant. Two earlier visits, his voluminous correspondence, and kindred concerns in science had already fashioned a circle of friends in Paris and other parts of *La Belle France*. His writings, his scientific achievements, his easy and unpretentious *savoir faire* made him the natural *philosophe* — the symbol of the Age of Enlightenment.

Patiently, effectively, he cultivated official and popular support for the American struggle for freedom. The alliance with France, without which our independence was in doubt, climaxed Franklin's labors in February, 1778. He remained at Passy, near Paris, handling details of the alliance, but also finding time to enjoy the companionship of social and intellectual luminaries and to write on scientific subjects. It is to the shrewd "Poor Richard" that America is indebted for the very favorable terms of the peace treaty ending the war with England in September, 1783, the consequence of two years of intricate diplomatic negotiations.

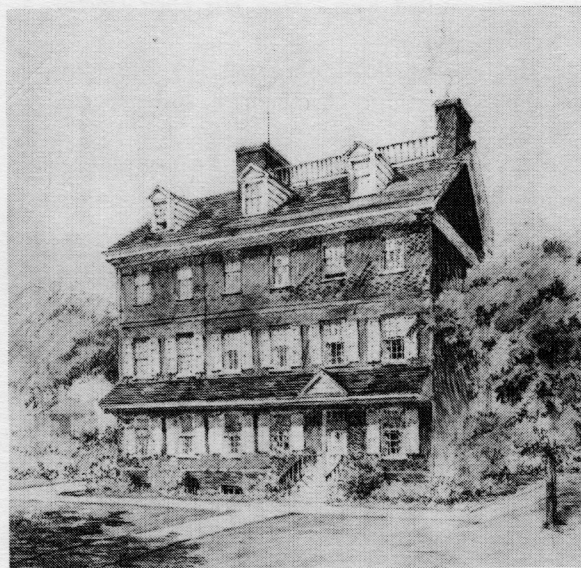
Upon his triumphal return to Philadelphia in 1785 he became president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, an executive body which replaced the office of governor under the State constitution of 1776. When the Consti-

tutional Convention met in 1787 to create a new form of government for the United States, Franklin was one of the most active delegates urging a new constitution. The genial old philosopher was the balance wheel in this assembly of clashing opinion and self-interest. His was the unofficial role of adjuster and compromiser, the brake on violent tongue, the gentle conciliator of opposing views, and, with Washington, leader in the search for unity.

This was Franklin's last great service to his country. Ill health had prevented him from attending the convention regularly, and a number of his speeches had been delivered by James Wilson, another Pennsylvania delegate. Now past eighty, his once splendid physique was beset with the infirmities of age. His few remaining years were passed pleasantly in the company of old friends who called at his home near Fourth and Market streets. Hours were spent at cards and cribbage, revising manuscripts, working on his *Autobiography*, and maintaining the exchange of letters begun early in life. Mind and pen were free from senility to the very end.

Franklin departed upon "the long mysterious Exodus of death" on April 17, 1790. A mourning city followed his cortege to the burial ground of Christ Church, where he was laid to rest beside his wife Deborah under a simple headstone. The many societies and institutions, civic, educational, scholarly, and fraternal, that he had founded, presided over, and aided, paid him homage. City and State officials, legislators, and judges marched to the sound of muffled bells past the State House (Independence Hall), shrine of the liberty he had done so much to ensure. Eulogies were offered in Congress and before the French National Assembly. Men of science of several continents took solemn note of the loss of a brilliant and penetrating mind. The presence of a warm and witty friend had gone from the world of letters.

"No other town," says Carl Von Doren, "burying its great man, ever buried more of itself than Philadelphia with Franklin." Yet after a century and a half he remains Philadelphia's first citizen.



*Franklin built this home in Philadelphia a block from the State House (now called Independence Hall) in 1766, then enlarged it on the left in 1786. Nothing remains but remnants of the cellar, which has been the object of archeological investigation. This sketch was based on available documentation.*

Walk through the heart of the old city. Visit its first hospital, its first learned society, its first library, and the site of its first college. Wander through the Independence Square neighborhood and bring to memory the events that gave birth to the United States. These are the memorials to his diligent toil and creative genius. Note the name of Franklin on schools, street, parkway, bridge, fire company, hotel, club, and institute. Such are the tributes to this most versatile man who "moved through his world in a humorous mastery of it." Memorials and tributes cast but faint reflection of one so endowed with inquiring mind, creative talent, patient humility, practical wisdom, capacity for friendship, and passion to improve himself and his fellow men. Of the writing of books and articles about him there is no end, for Benjamin Franklin was a man beyond ordinary dimensions.